

AMERICAN PICKERS
October 20, 2013 – I Corinthians 1: 20-30
The Church of the Covenant

American Pickers is a wonderful cable TV program on the History Channel that has two fellows who find some old, broken down barn somewhere in remote West Gibbip, South Carolina that is packed with old rusted, broken, throw-away stuff, that they then pick, and find hidden treasures where most thought was only garbage. They see what others cannot see –possibility and hope where others only see the castaway junk of a former time. I think this is a great metaphor for the church of Jesus Christ –Jesus sees us, not as we are, but as we can become. He dusts us off and calls us precious and priceless, because HE is willing to pay an exorbitant price for us and for the entire world to reclaim us from the junk pile. He is willing to pay the costly price of His own blood for us to have new life in HIM. That’s the ministry of the church in a nutshell –go out into the world, “pick”, and find people the rest of the world would throw away, in order to redeem them through the power in the precious blood of Jesus. The church, see, we are the *American Pickers*.

I think also always of a story I once read of the rag pickers of Cairo, Egypt. On the outskirts of one of the largest cities of the world is one of the largest dumps in the world. There on that landfill a group scour the foul, fetid and filthy dumpsite, and glean a small, meager existence picking rags and bundling them up and selling them for scraps to be made into paper. Whole families do this. Fathers, Mothers and their children live on that dumpsite and have for generations. They rescue from an earthy Gehenna and hell on earth rags that the rest of the world throw away. They are the rag pickers of the dump in Cairo, Egypt. And would it amaze you if I told you something else? They are also Coptic Christians, relegated to this menial task because in an Islamic state these are the only kinds and types of jobs they are allowed to do. Persecuted for their faith, killed because of their belief, their churches and their homes burned to the ground, they nevertheless keep on their task of rag picking. The church is always seeing possibility where the rest of the world cannot; Christians do what others will not do –rescue people, who others deem the off-scouring of the world, reclaiming them, dusting them off, giving them a future and a hope, and lifting them up to new life in Christ. When we commit ourselves as a church to becoming more missional for our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, we say I will go wherever YOU call me, Lord, I will do whatever it takes if YOU ask me, Lord; I will walk through dirty and difficult situations where I’d rather not be, Lord, if YOU walk beside me each step along the way. Its rag picking. It’s a willingness to be and become *American Pickers* for Jesus’ sake.

Our scripture for today is about rag picking, if you think about it. Our scripture is this: *“God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong.” (I Corinthians 1: 27)* God has “picked” if you will. God has gone across the face of the earth and has chosen. God has seen worth and value in people who others in the world might reject. , Like the American Pickers, God has PICKED what is “foolish”; God has picked what is “weak”. God has chosen you and me. God has sorted through the filthy rags of our lives and has picked us anyway. God has chosen us as HIS instruments of redeeming HIS world. HE has picked through our weakness and our foolishness, HE has picked through our fallen-ness and our failures; HE has taken us as we are, warts and all, sin and all, and dusted us off, and raised us up to new life in HIS Son, Jesus Christ. When we think ourselves wise in our own wisdom then we are foolish; when we think we stand strong in our own strength then we fail. But when we know we are not wise and need God’s wisdom, when we remember all our flaws and our weaknesses and know that we need God’s strength, it is then we can stand in the strength and the HOLY POWER of the one, true and LIVING God, and can make a profound difference in our world for HIM. *“He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus.” (v. 30)* People need the Lord; people need the Lord to pick clean their lives and see in them something of inestimable beauty and possibility, worth the highest price imaginable.

May I say this, as well? No person is worthy of the junkyard. No person is hopelessly flawed. Nobody is irredeemable. No one is beyond the redemption of the Master. No one is to be cast away into the dustbin of life

interminably. Every person has worth and possibility and hope. You may have a history. But you have a future in Christ Jesus. God can come and take the filthy rags of our lives and knit them together through His Holy Spirit and through His Son, into something of beauty and purpose, meaning and value. Our lives may start as filthy rags but they can become a quilt, a coat of many colors, stitched together by the hand of God and washed clean in the blood of Jesus.

I think also sometimes we dwell too much on our unworthiness. Often when we are asked to serve the church in some capacity we feel unqualified. We may feel unworthy. We don't believe we are capable. We feel someone else may be better, more holy, a better Christian. We dwell too much on our past and not enough on our future, on what God can and will do through us. HE takes earthen vessels, and the rags of our lives, and puts them together in ways in order to redeem His world. See, in order to be a rag picker (and that's what mission and service to the Lord Jesus is all about) first we must acknowledge our own rags, if you will. How we are not wise. How we are not strong. How unworthy we are to be a Christian let alone to serve Jesus as an elder or a deacon. But then we must remember how God has entered into our heart and life, how HE has stitched together our rags and patched together our broken-ness, how HE has made us whole through the love and the grace and the mercy of HIS Son, Jesus. See, it requires someone to acknowledge their own "Rag-iness" in order to become a ragpicker, and it requires a ragpicker to stitch together the ripped and broken lives around us –which is mission in the name of Jesus. Jesus needs our weakness, perhaps even more than our strength, in order to heal and redeem a weak and dying world. *"Consider your call, brethren..."* (v. 26) begins the Apostle Paul. You weren't strong and that's why God picked you –you were weak. You didn't have everything all figured out already, you lacked spiritual wisdom, and that's why God picked you. HE takes our willing and surrendered lives and uses them to affect His purposes in His world. He calls us to be American Pickers, stitching the rags together in the world as HE has stitched the rags together in our lives.

Walter Wangerin, Jr. tells a wonderful little story entitled "The Ragman" and with this I conclude. There was a young, handsome, strong man who pulled an old cart laden with brand new clothes through the city streets and he would call out in a strong, mellifluous voice: "Rags! New rags for old! I take your tired rags! Rags!" First, he came to an old woman and she was weeping, having experienced the loss of a loved one. The Ragman took her old handkerchief filled with her tears and exchanged it for a new one of finest linen. A funny thing happened – The Ragman began to sob great tears of grief into the old handkerchief. Second, he came to a young girl with a broken, bandaged and bleeding arm. He took the old bandage from her arm and gave her a clean one. He took the old, soiled rag and attached it to his own head. But remarkably the wound went with the rag. So from the Ragman's head now came blood, so went the weeping, bleeding Ragman. There was a drunk by the side of the road in a dirty, moth eaten blanket. The Ragman gave him a brand new blanket, but as the Ragman received the old blanket he also received the drunkenness. And eventually the Ragman came to the local garbage dump, weeping, bleeding, broken and carrying the addictions and the failures and the drunkenness and the sin of the world with him. Weighed down by its sadness and pain, there on that trashheap he died.

Beloved, the Ragman still trades old rags for new. He will redress us today. He has laid down His life, the old rag of this body on a garbage dump far away, called Calvary, and He has been raised through the power of God to new life, to power at the right hand of God the Father, Almighty. He will take the old rags of your life if you let Him. He will give you new. "Rags! Rags! New rags for old!" "The Ragman; the Ragman; the Christ!"

Who will become an "American Picker" for Jesus????? Then, MISSION IS POSSIBLE. And Amen.

*By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, PA
IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*